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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000156

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/29/2017
TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA DOESN'T SEE A NEAR TERM
SOLUTION; URGES CHAPTER VII FOR SPECIAL TRIBUNAL

REF: BEIRUT 00118

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) While warmly praising the U.S. and international support for Lebanon expressed at Paris III, Prime Minister Siniora was less hopeful regarding a near-term solution to his country's current political crisis. Siniora said that upon his return, he had reached out to Amal leader Nabih Berri, pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, and FPM leader Michel Aoun with disappointing results: Berri's tone had been "cold," Lahoud claimed that Paris III was irrelevant, and Aoun had refused to take the call from Siniora's office. (Note: Siniora's senior advisor Mohamed Chatah is still communicating with moderate Aounist advisor MP Ibrahim Kanaan, but believes the Aounist camp is split, with Aoun now listening primarily to his hard-liners. End note.) Due to constitutional requirements, Siniora said it will be nearly impossible to overcome March 8th resistance to the Special Tribunal and asked whether the U.S. would support a Chapter VII resolution to establish the court, a question he said he would pose to all UNSC-member ambassadors. The Prime Minister indicated he understood such an effort would be difficult and admitted that President Chirac, even while stating his support of the tribunal last week in Paris, appeared to want let the matter rest for a while. Concerning last Thursday's violent Sunni vs Shia confrontation, Siniora was convinced that Syrian-driven Amal supporters spearheaded the escalation, while Hizballah, which takes its guidance from Iran, was essentially a reluctant participant. Finally, he briefly discussed a plan to create an Arab consultative body to ensure the Arab assistance declared at Paris III does not lose its momentum. End summary.

¶2. (C) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora met with the Ambassador and Special Assistant on January 29 in his office in the Grand Serail. Senior advisors Ambassador Mohamed Chatah and Rola Nouredine also attended the meeting. The Prime Minister was noticeably more reserved than usual.

¶3. (U) PM Siniora described Paris III as an powerful affirmation of the international community's support for democracy in Lebanon. It had surpassed his expectations and will hopefully provide the foundation upon which his country can build stability and prosperity. He particularly expressed deep gratitude for the critical role played by the U.S. in making the conference a success. Siniora said he would be sending President Bush a letter of sincere thanks

from the Lebanese people. He mused about whether he could place a phone call to the President. Lastly, he also wanted to express his special thanks for the U.S.-Lebanon Partnership Initiative, which he hopes will create new opportunities, particularly in the field of education.

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL IS CRITICAL FOR SOVEREIGNTY

¶4. (C) Despite the galvanizing support Lebanon received at Paris III, PM Siniora was deeply concerned that last week's events in Beirut confirmed that the anti-government March 8th coalition was playing for keeps. He discussed the harshly uncompromising statements that Hassan Nasrallah has been making in his nightly televised Ashura sermons, as well as the previous evening's dogmatic interpretation of the impasse by Michel Aoun's closest advisor Gibran Bassil on an interview show. Even Nabih Berri, who assured the Ambassador last week that he was looking for a negotiated solution (reftel), has turned "cold" and is withdrawing once again into unhelpful silence. In Siniora's opinion, Berri's lone effort at compromise was essentially a plan to implement the Syrian agenda in steps: freezing movement on the tribunal; creating a blocking minority for Hizballah; and a resignation of the Siniora government. In Siniora's eyes, a political solution, if still possible, is a long way off. Siniora stated that he was unaware of the content of any discussions between the Iranians and the Saudis on Lebanon.

¶5. (C) The best way forward, Siniora maintained, is establishment of the tribunal by international fiat, that is, by a Chapter VII resolution. At this point in time, with a confident Syria and Iran pushing their proxies (although apparently at different speeds), he sees little likelihood

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that either Aoun or Nasrallah would agree to any solution short of a near-complete surrender by March 14th.

¶6. (C) Acknowledging that attaining Chapter VII would be extremely difficult given the Russian, Chinese and possibly even French positions, Siniora nevertheless argued that if the Syrians were not held accountable, or at least indicted, their increasing pressure would eventually break Lebanon. Siniora's advisor Mohamed Chatah asked if the U.S. would be willing to introduce a Chapter VII resolution, even if it did not have the express support of the French, implying that such a move, even if unsuccessful, would give the Syrians pause in their drive to unseat the democratically-elected government of Lebanon. Siniora then repeated the question, saying that he would ask all ambassadors from countries represented on the Security Council the same question. The Ambassador repeated the U.S. view that it would be extremely difficult to obtain a Chapter VII resolution.

¶7. (C) Siniora inquired whether UNIIIC Commissioner Brammertz, at the completion of his mandate in June, would write a report that would, in effect, be an international indictment of those responsible for the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Perhaps Siniora was signaling that he is already considering the implications of a failure to establish the tribunal, but he continued that what was most important for Lebanon was an unequivocal indictment of those guilty of the crime, presumably Syria and its agents in Lebanon. But that depended on Brammertz writing a far different final report than his interim reports would indicate. Siniora requested U.S. assistance in convincing Brammertz that if he has indictable proof, he should clearly state so in his final report, otherwise, the evidence may never see the light of day.

IS SYRIA CALLING THE SHOTS

¶8. (C) In his discussion of last Thursday's Sunni-on-Shia violence, the Prime Minister expressed his view that the

prominent role played by Amal supporters in the confrontation at Beirut's Arab University indicated that Syria now held the upper hand in making the tactical decisions in the current crisis. At the same time, the reticence of Hizballah's supporters to fully engage the Sunni protesters showed that Iran continued to influence events, but mainly to control the degree of conflict, while Syria appeared to be directing when things actually occur. (Note: Hizballah supporters did participate in Thursday's violence, but principally in reaction to events. And Nasrallah was the first March 8th leader to call his supporters off the street in the face of the subsequent LAF curfew. End note.)

¶9. (C) The Prime Minister said that while Lebanon was presently in a precarious "balance of terror," Syria would do all it could to drive the situation into chaos -- thus affirming its long-held position that Lebanon without Syria is ungovernable. It was this belief that formed the basis of his pessimistic outlook for a genuine political compromise.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The Siniora we encountered in our 1/29 meeting was not the Siniora we are accustomed to seeing. While in recent weeks Siniora had been intensely focused and energized on the preparations and lead-up to Paris III, in this meeting he seemed utterly devoid of initiative or ideas of what to do next. Usually firmly positioned on the windbag side of the conversational spectrum, the PM was surprisingly reticent and nonresponsive. Even the ubiquitous ringing phones of his office and aides were eerily silent for the first time we can recall. And except for his effusive praise of Paris III and the U.S. leadership role in its success, Siniora was downbeat -- more so than we have ever witnessed before. One had the impression that he was in the "day after," let-down, hangover period after a really excellent party in Paris: Paris III is over, the much-feared financial crunch in February can now be handled successfully, but grim political realities in Lebanon have not changed significantly. Marwan Hamadeh confided to the Ambassador later that evening that Siniora's depression may also stem in part from Nazek Hariri's insulting treatment of him in Paris. The "closest friend to Rafiq" was, according to Hamadeh, treated coldly by Rafiq's widow even at the dinner she hosted for the Lebanese delegation to Paris III on Thursday night.

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¶11. (C) As surprising as his bleak mood was the ignorance Siniora professed about any Saudi-Iranian efforts to end Lebanon's political crisis. He was (understandably) dismissive about Nabih Berri's ideas without offering any counter proposals of his own. Only two topics seemed to capture his interest: sending out feelers about the Quixotic possibility of a Chapter VII resolution creating the Special Tribunal, and U.S. policy toward Iran and Hizballah. Indeed, while there was nothing particularly noteworthy about the substance of the discussion of U.S. policy toward Iran and Hizballah, it was clear that the Siniora was obsessed by the topic. Deeply worried, the PM seems to have digested and accepted as fact U.S. media reports suggesting potential U.S. military action in Lebanon against Hizballah. When the Ambassador saw Siniora briefly in the evening, Siniora again raised this topic, urging the U.S. to realize that U.S. military action against Hizballah inside Lebanon would strengthen, not weaken, popular support for an organization he, too, detests. Such action, he said, will be the excuse that Hizballah needs to attack the Grand Serail and destroy the "made-in-U.S." prime minister once and for all. (We suggested that he relax.) While we asked for this meeting with the PM in order to engage him seriously on the question of how to control the Syrian-Lebanese border, we will have to try that topic in a subsequent meeting.

FELTMAN